

BOOK REVIEWS

Peter Singer. *The Most Good You Can Do*. The Text Publishing Company. Melbourne. 2015. p.217.

The intent behind this book is deeply constructive. It is arguing for a new ethical ideal: that people do the most good they can. The book is directed particularly at giving *ie.*, to charities, most of which is emotion driven. Singer argues that if it were more thoughtful, it would be more effective. So we should check up on our charities. When people do that now, they usually enquire about what percentage of their gift goes to administration and what percentage to the ultimate recipient. But the really important question is how effective are the funds that get to the end of the line.

That question can now be answered by 'meta-charities' such as The Life You Can Save, Give Well, and Giving What We Can, which compare the results obtained in the field by different organisations. For example, what does the most good, organisations which train guide dogs, or organisations like the Fred Hollows Foundation which perform operations to cure common forms of blindness in developing countries? Your dollar does much more good in the latter cause. Fred Hollows can cure blindness for \$25, but it takes about \$5000 to train a guide dog.

Is it possible that effective altruists are moved by universal love? Not necessary, replies Singer, who seems to have reservations about that motive, and, in any case, there is something better: effective empathy, which is the ability to put oneself in the position of others and identify with their feelings or emotions. [p76] That is the cognitive aspect of empathy, but it has an emotional aspect as well, which is evoked by individuals and pictures of them. For example, in one study, people were shown a photo of a child, given her name and age, and told that to save her life, \$300,000 needed to be raised, and they

were asked to donate. Then another group was shown photos of eight children, given their names and ages, and told that \$300,000 was needed to save all their lives, and they were asked to donate. The first group donated more. Effective altruists consider that absurd, and that it proves the inadequacy of emotional empathy. Cognitive empathy takes a longer view.

Someone remarked that empathy is the 'grand theme of our time.' Let us hope so. Are there any questions we should ask about it? The most obvious one is 'What is the greatest good?' Different cultural perspectives give different answers. In *Compass*, in 1990, an Indian sister, a Religious of The Sacred Heart, Vandana Matarji, wrote that it would have been much better if Christianity in India, instead of building schools and hospitals, had produced some genuine gurus. The function of a guru, is to transmit her experience of God to her pupil. [This journal. 1990.No.2.p20]

Singer's position on intrinsic value is a little unusual. Instead of finding it in things like simplicity, peace, integrity, community, fairness, and so on, he locates it in 'positive experiences'—negative experiences are pains, nightmares, embarrassments, *etc.* [p.147] Singer's position lets in the guru's experience. Singer does not intend that, since he is a long time campaigner for unbelief, but experiences of God are positive, if any are.

There is another question we might ask about, love. Is that the same as emotional empathy—feelings of warmth, compassion and concern? Singer is not enthusiastic about love, but some luminaries have thought it is more than empathy. The poet John Donne believed that love involves inter-subjectivity, 'She is all states and princes, I, nothing else is'. St John's Gospel seems to say the same thing 'I in thee and thou in me.' Inter-subjectivity re-appears in the writings of

Swedenborg. Pascal held that there are three distinct orders of existence—the orders of matter, thought, and charity [love].

Finally, it is worth remarking that Big Brother is now watching everyone—at work. That started about 60 years ago with time and motion studies of factory workers, and it has now spread everywhere. No policeman or professor is exempt. With respect to the latter, how many hours of teaching does she do, per week? How many publications has she had over the last five years? Are they in peer reviewed journals?

Now, 'meta-charities' are checking up on charities. What kind of performance are the meta-charities turning in? That question opens up the prospect, beloved of philosophers, of an infinite regress of checkers.

—Reg Naulty.

Michael White and Tom Corcoran, *The Story of a Catholic Parish - REBUILT. Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost, and Making Church Matter.*

Winner of two 2014 Catholic Press Awards: Pastoral Ministry (First Place) and Design and Production (Honorable Mention).

Drawing on the wisdom gleaned from thriving mega-churches and innovative business leaders while anchoring their vision in the Eucharistic center of Catholic faith, Fr. Michael White and lay associate Tom Corcoran present the compelling and inspiring story to how they brought their parish back to life.

This is a story of stopping everything and changing focus. When their parish reached a

breaking point, White and Corcoran asked themselves how they could make the Church matter to Catholics, and they realized the answer was at the heart of the Gospel.

Their faithful response not only tripled their weekend mass attendance, but also yielded increased giving, flourishing ministries, and a vibrant, solidly Catholic spiritual revival.

White and Corcoran invite all Catholic leaders to share the vision, borrow their strategies, and rebuild their own parishes. They offer a wealth of guidance for anyone with the courage to hear them.

This is quite an amazing story. It is about a parish in the United States that Michael and Tom walked into as PP and Pastoral Assistant that was somewhat dead and dysfunctional. They share the highs and the lows, the successes and the failures, what worked in revitalisation and what didn't, the welcome from some and the resistance to change from others.....

They set about rebuilding the parish with the goal of making disciples of all the parishioners who would then go out making disciples of others in the community.

I think this book is required reading for anyone in parish ministry and anyone interested in knowing how to get the best out of the parish community they are a member of.

Both Michael and Tom were out in Australia a couple of years ago speaking at a conference and running a number of workshops in some dioceses.

The book is an easy read and highly recommended.

God in the person of Jesus goes to the periphery, to the desert, and takes his place in the midst of sinful humanity; the messiah came and was to be found drawing close to the unclean. If that is where Jesus began his public ministry, and if Jesus was repeatedly criticized for eating and drinking with sinners throughout his public ministry, does it not provide an example of where and how we should be?

—Bishop John Stowe OFM